

**DEALING WITH BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN**

**BY**

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## DEALING WITH BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS AMONG/IN CHILDREN

### INTRODUCTION

Abnormal or maladaptive behaviour is a term used to define any pattern of thought, feeling, or action that is harmful to an individual or others.

A child with behaviour problems, depending upon what age, may develop unusual patterns of harmful behaviour. The problems may include depression, hallucinations suicide, murder, delinquent behaviour anxiety, racial prejudice, cigarette smoking and drug and alcohol taking (Lahey and Ciminero, 1980).

Most children like each one of us engages in some thoughts, feelings or actions that are harmful to us or those around us. The most important thing to consider is how harmful these behaviours are in order to consider what to do about them.

A combination of biologicals and psychological factors makes each individual child pattern of behaviour quite destructive.

### **BAD BEHAVIOUR AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHILDREN**

Children learn how to live from their parents or guardians. It is important for parents, guardians or care givers to portray good behaviour to children since these are their role models (Caregivers workshop report held at Ranche House College, Harare, 1996).

Behaviour that is problematic in children shows when they start to:

- 1) use bad language, gestures and facial expressions and end up being aggressive to other children, caregivers and parents.
- 2) adopt poor self image - if labelled stupid, dull or naughty - the child thus loses self confidence
- 3) abscond from school
- 4) being irresponsible due to lack of love, care and attention
- 5) indulge in delinquent behaviour in a bid to attract attention

- 6) develop a culture of violence if parents or caregivers have an attitude of "spare the rod and spoil the child"
- such an attitude (of beating children) results in negative attitudes
  - it does not enforce good behaviour
  - corporal punishment must be avoided at all costs.

Discipline should be applied in a way that reinforces good behaviour and in a manner that which does not destroy the child's personality.

Quay, 1979 described behaviour problems as conduct problems. These problems include disobedience, fighting and bullying, truancy, irritability, showing off, impudence towards adults, disruption of school routines, disturbing and provoking peers, risk taking, irresponsibility, lying and criminal acts such as stealing.

#### INCIDENCE AND CAUSES

Barker (1976; Rutter 1976) estimated that 4 - 6 percent of all children show enough of the above characteristics. Conduct problems are the most common and best understood of all childhood disorders. The disorder is more frequent in boys than in girls and the ratio is 3:1.

Professionals, parents and caregivers are encouraged to acknowledge difficult behaviours and accept problem children especially when they grow up to be teenagers. One should acknowledge that these behaviours are strenuous to whoever is giving care to these children some of the caregivers are not equipped with the knowledge of some behaviours such as;

- bedwetting
- aggression
- substance abuse
- premature sex
- temper ta

- depression and
- withdrawal

Social work professionals would best offer relevant assistance to both children, family members and caregivers.

According to the Freudian theory discussed by Mark and Ervin (1970) experiences that occur in childhood (ie early developmental stages) have a special impact that is stronger than at any other time in the life of a child. These early experiences are likely to relate to parents because of their high degree of dependency on them.

Children who are temporarily or permanently placed in institutions or orphanages develop behaviour problems. Spitz (1946) reported that children who are separated from their mothers and placed in orphanages became apprehensive, fitful and later became depressed. Bowlby (1952) concluded that (separation and abuse of children have long lasting negative effects on their psychological development. Children who are abused at an early age tend to have problems of aggression in adulthood and these also tend to abuse their own children.

Clarke and Clarke (1976) discovered that impoverished environments and neglect have definite stressful effects on children and they have lasting effects when children continue to live in maladaptive environments.

Although behaviour disorders know no age boundaries they are less common among children and can start anytime (Lahey and Ciminero 1980). When studying behaviour disorders, it is important to look at them separately from those of adults. Behaviour problems are changeable and less differentiated in children. For anyone to engage in treating disorders in children, one needs specialised knowledge of child behaviour disorders. If adult disorders are to be prevented, conditions in childhood that lead to adult disorders

must be identified. The proportion of children with behaviour problems at any given time is lower than that of adults, yet it is sad to say this proportion receives less professional help than adults (Barker 1996).

## **TREATMENT OF CONDUCT PROBLEMS**

Many conduct problems can be treated successfully using social learning therapy and this has been found to be constantly effective. Children who show conduct problems at the age of 10 will continue up to the age of 14.

## **SOCIAL LEARNING INTERVENTIONS**

Social workers and other professionals need to advise parents, guardians and care givers to:

- 1) make their requests and instructions to their children more clearly.
- 2) to increase the rate of positive reinforcement for their children's appropriate behaviour and decrease the rate of punishment and to
- 3) negotiate formal contracts between themselves and their children and
  - specify behaviours that should be changed and the
  - consequences of such a change. Forehand and Atkenson (1977) carried out an evaluation of the social learning theory in treating conduct problems. They discovered that children treated this way moved in positive direction than those who did not receive this treatment.

## **CONCLUSION**

Behaviour problems in children can be of great disturbance not only to caregivers and parents but to other children also. Behaviour

that is problematic is equally disturbing as conduct problems. Nevertheless, if the social learning therapy is applied such maladaptive behaviours can cease among children.

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